BIOGRAPHY

Reprinted from "ANNALS OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS OF ENGLAND,"
December, 1950, pages 505-507

PAST PRESIDENTS

3. JOHN ABERNETHY

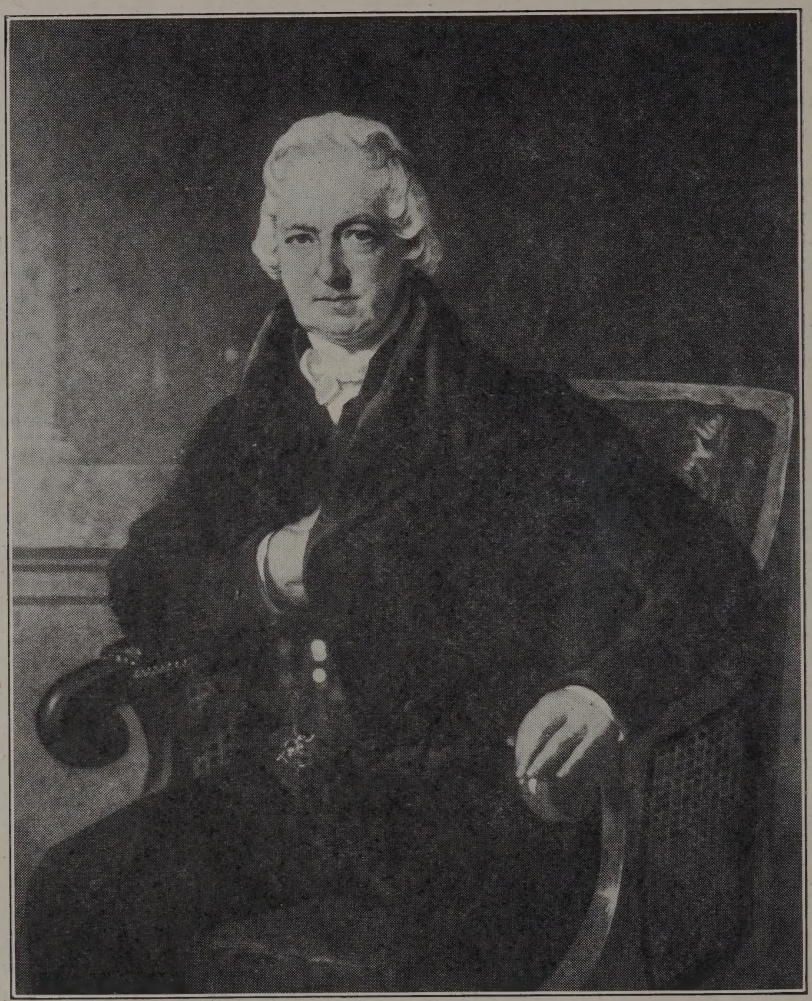
JOHN ABERNETHY IS the most admired of the followers of John Hunter. He made no effort to achieve the worldly success of his contemporaries Sir Astley Cooper or Sir Everard Home, but was held in the warmest regard by his colleagues and pupils. His name is permanently venerated in the Abernethian Society of St. Bartholomew's, the hospital which he adorned as surgeon and teacher.

Abernethy's appearance is familiar from the portrait in characteristic stance, with head thrust forward, which is in the Great Hall at St. Bartholomew's. This painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence, P.R.A., has been engraved and reproduced many times. The impressive portrait of him, as an older man seated in his chair, by C. W. Pegler, is recorded in the fine mezzotint by Charles Turner, reproduced here. Pegler's portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1828. It belonged to the Warburton family descendants of Abernethy's daughter, Anne. After being lost through the error of a store-keeper it has recently been recovered for St. Bartholomew's Hospital by Sir Alec Martin (1949).

Mr. H. B. Willett, the son of Alfred Willett, F.R.C.S., and grandson of Abernethy's other daughter, Elinor, Lady Borrows, very generously presented to the College in 1947 the striking portrait of his great-grandfather which has been attributed to Lawrence. The pose corresponds precisely with the head and shoulders of Pegler's portrait and this splendid picture is, no doubt, a replica made by Pegler himself so that each of Abernethy's daughters might have one (Thornton, 1949).

Abernethy was Assistant Surgeon to his Hospital from 1787 to 1815, when he succeeded Sir Charles Blicke as Surgeon. He made his name as a teacher of surgery, anatomy and physiology. Until his time, students were taught by the private enterprise of individuals, but Abernethy's lectures were so popular that the Governors of the Hospital built him a theatre in 1791. The College possesses a dozen manuscripts of students' notes of his lectures; the earliest of these is dated 1792. The manuscripts include notes by Peter Mere Latham and by William Lawrence, who afterwards distinguished themselves as physician and surgeon respectively. In contrast with his popularity among his students, who learned more from his droll phrases and apposite anecdotes than from the formal lectures of other teachers, Abernethy was feared, by those who knew him less well, for his caustic tongue. He could not suffer fools nor the airs and graces of the great of this world, nor would he pander to the whims of pampered dyspeptic or neurotic patients. He was infinitely kind and helpful to the simple and direct.

As a surgeon Abernethy was profoundly influenced by the bold technique of John Hunter, and even more by his vitalist philosophy and his search for a scientific basis for surgery. He saw much of Hunter during the last years of his life, 1791-93. He became a friend of Edward Jenner,



JOHN ABERNETHY

22200045347

Hunter's favourite pupil, and promoted vaccination when Jenner announced his discovery in 1798. He was a constant supporter of William Clift, Hunter's last secretary and the first Conservator of the Hunterian Museum at the College. Abernethy extended Hunter's operation for the cure of aneurysm by ligature at a distance, by tying the external iliac artery, for the first time in 1797.

Abernethy wrote much and several of his books were reprinted during his life-time. Dr. Franklin and Dr. Jackson compiled a bibliography, with interesting notes, in 1931. The most famous of his writings was *Surgical observations on the constitutional origin and treatment of local diseases*, 1809. This was ' My Book,' which the author used to prescribe for his patients. He published his *Lectures on the theory and practice of surgery* in 1830, which preserve all that is of permanent value in his work.

At the College, Abernethy devoted his influence to the promotion of the Hunterian ideals of surgical research and teaching. As Hunterian Professor in 1817 he lectured on ' Mr. Hunter's Theory of Life,' and as Hunterian Orator in 1819 he gave a sketch of the history of surgery culminating in the work of Hunter, of whom he told several characteristic stories. " When I look on Sir Joshua Reynolds' picture of Hunter," he said, " I feel as if I saw before me an old man, a shrewd man, aye, and a benevolent man too, in the act and attitude of habitual thought." Abernethy served on the Council from 1810-30, and was President in 1826.

He was born on 3rd April 1764, the son of a London merchant. His family had settled in Ulster from Aberdeenshire a hundred years earlier ; his father's father was distinguished as a Presbyterian minister and preacher in Ireland. Abernethy practised in Bedford Row near Gray's Inn, not far from St. Bartholomew's and quite convenient to the College. He retired to Enfield, where he died on 28th April 1831.

REFERENCES

FRANKLIN, A. W. and J. M. JACKSON (1931) *St. Bart's Hosp. J.* **38**, 159-163.
GREEN, N. A. (1948) *Ibid.* **52**, 135-137, 172-178, 188-190.
HARRIS, C. F. (1948) *Ibid.* **52**, 191.
KEITH, SIR A. (1931) *Ibid.* **38**, 151-159.
MACILWAIN, G. (1835) *Memoirs of John Abernethy*. London. 2 vols.
MARTIN, SIR A. (1949) *St. Bart's Hosp. J.* **53**, 50.
PAYNE, J. F. (1885) *Dictionary of National Biography* **1**, 49-52.
PLARR, V. G. (1900) in Sir W. MacCormac's *Address of Welcome, Centenary of R.C.S.*, p. 64-69.
THORNTON, J. L. (1949) *St. Bart's Hosp. J.* **53**, 50-51.
———————— *Life and letters of John Abernethy*. Unpublished.

Printed by
THE TIMES PUBLISHING COMPANY, LIMITED
PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE, LONDON, E.C.4
ENGLAND